Emerging from Uncertainty Together: Priorities for the College Innovation Network 2021-22

Colleges and universities across the country are leaving a year of disruption and uncharted territory into a still uncertain world. Postsecondary institutions now face the reality of enrollment loss, the vexing challenge of advancing equitable access to EdTech, and a growing demand for more flexible learning modalities. On this backdrop, we convened the College Innovation Network (CIN) to reflect on the year’s unique challenges and, more importantly, to look forward and set priorities for transformation in their institutions and the initiatives they will advance together.

The College Innovation Network (CIN) was established in 2020 as a collaborative network of mission-aligned postsecondary institutions committed to better supporting their students’ evolving learning needs with EdTech through an empirically-driven approach. Findings from our inaugural CIN EdTech Student Survey show that students vary in their confidence to learn and adapt to new EdTech in the classroom, a term coined EdTech self-efficacy, which is robustly associated with students’ learning experiences. The findings highlight the need for greater support in implementing EdTech solutions on campus and then supporting students’ use of those solutions.

The 2021-22 academic year will continue to present challenges for institutions, but also opportunities for institutions to innovate. At CIN’s second Annual Network Needs Assessment (ANNA) convening in July 2021 which aimed at uncovering the set of the most important and common challenges facing CIN member institutions, Network members identified several needs that will drive targets for problem solving and innovation across CIN over the next year.
**CIN Works Collaboratively to Identify Student Needs**

Students’ needs are dynamic and constantly evolving – no single product or innovation can solve every problem. As student needs change and new innovations emerge, the best way to remain efficacious is to develop and implement effective processes for uncovering insights about students’ emerging and pressing needs, and then evaluating the impact of solutions as they are implemented. Knowing this, at CIN we have developed a robust needs assessment and research evaluation process to support institutions and their students – *our process is the solution*.

The initial phase of the CIN Needs Assessment Process consists of an internal analytic and discovery process with each CIN institution, leveraging insights from interviews from key stakeholders and institutional data in order to generate launching points for deep discussion with CIN Members at the ANNA convening.

**Three-phase CIN Needs Assessment Process**

**PHASE 1: INSTITUTION INTERVIEWS**

In-depth interviews with institutional stakeholders to identify the key needs of each Member institution that will serve as a launching point of cross-member collaboration.

**PHASE 2: CROSS-MEMBER COLLABORATION**

Annual Network Needs Assessment convening with all Member institutions to iterate and refine Network needs that will guide EdTech research at CIN.

**PHASE 3: PERSONALIZED SOLUTIONING**

In-depth student, staff, and faculty research to identify specific aspects within Network needs to focus EdTech solutioning at Member institutions.

With our Network growing as we embark on a new academic year, CIN held our ANNA Convening, a key collaborative phase in our rigorous three-phase Needs Assessment Process, involving a dozen CIN institutions and nearly three dozen key stakeholders. Across numerous facilitated sessions utilizing iterative design principles, participants are guided through a process of active discussion, iteration, and refinement. The culmination of this process was the identification of important challenges facing in the higher education sector, which are shown and described in the graphic below.

**Core challenges facing higher education, derived from the 2021 CIN ANNA Convening**

- **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND BELONGING**
  - As institutions return to on-campus activities and continue to execute remote and hybrid learning options, keeping students connected with one another and fostering a sense of belonging within institutions is top of mind.

- **EFFECTIVE DELIVERY OF STUDENT RESOURCES**
  - Institutions are increasingly the source for a variety of life supports to promote wellness and holistic support for student’s needs. How to effectively inform students of what is available and then deliver those resources is a key priority.

- **ACCESS AND EQUITY TO EDTECH**
  - Near universal learning has made salient inequities of access and use of EdTech solutions for online learning. As hybrid and online learning options increase in demand, ensuring all students have the tools they need to succeed is an area ripe for institutions to innovate.

- **FLEXIBLE COURSE DELIVERY OPTIONS**
  - Students and faculty have become more comfortable with online and hybrid course options during the pandemic, but there remains the challenge of how to deliver high-quality, hy-flex course model options and integrate them into standard university operations moving forward.

- **ADDRESSING LEARNING LOSS DUE TO COVID-19**
  - There remains a large degree of uncertainty across the education sector about how student learning may have been impacted by the stress of the pandemic since 2020. Identifying the scope of the learning problem and solutions to address it will remain a priority of institutions in the long-term.
The insights uncovered from the ANNA Convening are the foundation from which CIN works to uncover how each challenge manifests uniquely at each institution by conducting qualitative research with students and stakeholders. This final phase of the Needs Assessment Process will enable CIN to tailor EdTech solutions to each institution that have the greatest likelihood of addressing students' needs at each institution.

**Strategic Priorities for the Uncertain Year Ahead**

On Day 1 of the 2021 ANNA Convening, we identified five core thematic areas of needs shared across the Network: Student Engagement and Belonging, Effective Delivery of Student Resources, Access and Equity to EdTech, Flexible Course Delivery Options, and Addressing Learning Loss due to COVID-19. Once identified, participants reflected on which of those needs were most urgent and pressing at their institution. After analyzing those data responses, we reconvened on Day 2 to refine and finalize the strategic priorities for CIN in the year ahead.

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION EMERGE AS TOP PRIORITIES FOR THE YEAR AHEAD**

Although CIN has, by design, diverse types of higher education institutions, our ANNA Convening revealed that there were two areas that all institutions agreed were urgent, top priorities: Identifying innovative and effective ways to deliver the resources and supports that students need, and how to foster student engagement and belonging in a new hybrid college environment.

The past year of online learning has put a spotlight on how to effectively communicate with students. Although email is a mainstay in higher education, it no longer seems to be serving students effectively in communicating the right information at the right time. Institutions also learned that, just like courses, students want more flexible delivery of student support services, such as mental health counseling and tutoring support, that don't require on-campus visits. The challenge for institutions moving forward is to identify solutions for how to effectively develop and deliver essential supportive resources that students need, at the times they need them.

Institutions are also keenly focused on how to create a sense of community and belonging among students as they return to a different type of college campus. For many institutions, online and hybrid learning options are likely to be retained. But, as students are on campus less, it becomes even more pressing to engage students with faculty, staff, and the institution beyond the classroom. The challenge moving forward will be identifying solutions that afford qualitatively rich engagement and peer connection both on campus and online.
ACCESS AND EQUITY REMAIN LONG-TERM PRIORITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Access and Equity surfaced as an additional domain of high priority, but one that has been more of an enduring theme that institutions have been working to address for many years. A near universal switch to online learning in 2020 brought to bear the reality of inequitable access, especially with regards to essential EdTech that students need to succeed in learning online. In particular, this past year of online learning has made salient how the lack of access to basic technologies, such as laptops and wifi, impacted students’ learning experiences.

As our 2021 CIN EdTech Student Survey made clear, foundational EdTech hardware and software, like computers, learning management systems, and visual editing software for example, are driving the online learning transition in higher education. But inequitable access to foundational EdTech can inhibit students’ ability to use other EdTech that requires laptops (rather than phones), the latest operating systems, or reliable internet connections – a problem we refer to as tech dependencies – that can exacerbate inequity of learning experiences for students. Innovative, long-term solutioning for ensuring that all students have access to the tools they need to succeed will be paramount in an increasingly online, tech-enabled environment.

CAMPUS-BASED INSTITUTIONS TURN ATTENTION TO LEARNING LOSS AND FLEXIBLE COURSE DELIVERY

CIN has as members both traditional, campus-based colleges and universities, as well as online and hybrid institutions. This diversity can sometimes produce differing needs across institution types. Whereas all our institutions agreed on the top priorities for the Network to focus on in the upcoming year, we did observe a difference between the priorities of campus-based and online-based institutions for the upcoming year.

Addressing learning loss due to covid and designing flexible course delivery options were notably less urgent of a priority for CIN’s online-based institutions, whereas campus-based institutions viewed this as a long-term priority for their institutions. Of course, institutions that are already online require little change to their infrastructure and operations for online learning. Yet, campus-based institutions are thinking about how to design long-term hybrid solutions that students are interested in and are keen to not regress back to “business as usual” once campuses reopen.

With regard to learning loss resulting from the COVID pandemic, there remains uncertainty across the higher education sector as to the extent of the learning loss and the optimal solutions to addressing it. Institutions will be monitoring the progress of their students over the next year to gain greater perspective and develop long-term solutions.

From Priorities to Action: What’s Next at CIN

Although we begin the 2021 academic year with a bit of uncertainty about what is to come, the collaborative nature of the CIN Member institutions ensures that we embark on this year together. The year ahead will no doubt be filled with new and unique challenges but there will also be opportunities for innovation and progress. As the new year begins, CIN is diligently working to support the evolution of education. Following a successful first year, CIN has doubled their membership, launched several EdTech evaluation studies across the Network, and will be continuing on to Phase 3 of the Needs Assessment Process with the new Members. We can’t wait to see what we accomplish this year.

ABOUT THE COLLEGE INNOVATION NETWORK

CIN is a network of higher education institutions committed to serving diverse student populations. Our vision is to support the evolution of higher education towards a future in which EdTech is an effective vehicle for social mobility. EdTech is an increasingly critical piece of students’ learning experience, but the adoption of such technology poses a particular set of challenges that can impede progress and reduce the positive impact of EdTech on student experiences. By leveraging the power of relationships, CIN supports educational institutions throughout the full lifecycle of EdTech implementation and evaluation with the ultimate goal of improving the student experience. Our goal is to transform the EdTech adoption process for institutions, and create a marketplace and community in which innovation can thrive. Learn more about CIN by visiting wgulabs.org/cin